

**Luke 9:28-36** <sup>28</sup> Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup> And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. <sup>30</sup> Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup> They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup> Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. <sup>33</sup> Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying. <sup>34</sup> While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup> Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" <sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. But they kept silent, and in those days, they told no one any of the things they had seen.

Luke 9:28-36

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"The Courage to Encounter God"

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There's an old story, and maybe I've told it before, but not recently, about "...an inattentive, workaholic husband who suddenly decided to surprise his wife with a night to remember. He went down to the department store and bought her the expensive dress she had been admiring. He bought her a bottle of fine perfume to go with it. He ordered tickets to the Broadway play she had been wanting to see and made reservations at their favorite restaurant. On his way home he stopped by the florist and bought a dozen red roses which he carried home under his arm. Upon arriving home, he exploded through the door, hugged his wife affectionately and told her the plans he'd made. "I just want you to know that I love you; I appreciate you; I am grateful for you in my life."

Instead of melting in the man's arms, his wife started screaming at the top of her voice. "This has been the worst day of my life," she said. "We lost our biggest account at work; co-workers were obnoxious; clients were unreasonable. I came home to find the kids had broken my favorite lamp; the nanny is quitting; the water heater is out; and now, my normally steady reliable husband comes home drunk." [original author unknown, from illustrations for Transfiguration, year C, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I feel for this couple – both of them. Here he is, trying to do something nice, and he's lambasted for it, which is perhaps a lesson to all of us that we would do well to tell our loved ones that we appreciate them a little more often than once a decade. And she, well, she lives by the age-old adage that if something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Which is good advice when perusing emails from foreign princes, but perhaps not such a good rule of thumb for dealing with one's spouse. I am grateful that my husband Brad is still occasionally able to surprise me, and most of the time, it's in a good way.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday—the final Sunday in the season of epiphany. Since the Magi journeyed to Jerusalem nearly two months ago now, we have studied scripture lessons that reveal something of who God is – lessons that have to do with light, insight, wisdom, and growth. This year, I have focused us on courage, which perhaps reveals more about the state of my spirit than anything, but I remain convinced that courage is what the church needs in our current social context. Courage to speak truth to power. Courage to stand up for the stranger, the hungry, the poor, and the marginalized. Courage to imitate Jesus, which we do only by his grace – to love our enemies and let our light shine and have hope despite our fears.

The 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel begins with Jesus' empowering his disciples to cure disease and cast out demons. That must have been so intoxicating—to be part of that kind of ministry. Jesus sends them out through the countryside, and things are happening. Word even gets back to King Herod. After being on the road preaching and healing, Jesus draws his disciples apart for rest, but the crowds are so desperate that they follow Jesus to the hillside, where Jesus feeds 5000 of them. When they finally have time to themselves for prayer, Jesus asks his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” Some may remember Peter's response: You are the Christ, the Messiah of God!” Given everything that's happened, you can see why Peter has no trouble declaring that, believing that! Everything has been coming together for this ministry—power, healing, feeding, even the King has heard of them. It had to be such a rush for those disciples. But that's when Jesus introduces a new concept: The son of man must undergo suffering and rejection, be killed and rise again on the third day. And my disciples must take up a cross and follow. In Matthew's telling, Peter pulls Jesus aside and says, “no Lord, that's not right!” But Luke doesn't report that exchange or Jesus' famous rebuke (“get behind me, Satan!”). In Luke, the disciples are silent in the face of Jesus' predictions. Utterly silent. For eight days.

What were those eight days like? What were they thinking? What were they feeling? Did it take the wind out of their sails? Luke doesn't say it in so many words, but the sentiment is clearly implied. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain and is transfigured, but the other disciples meanwhile can't cast out an epileptic demon that has possessed a child. Then there's an argument over who is the greatest, a village that won't receive Jesus' ministry, and the chapter ends by telling about a few anonymous would-be followers who turn back and give up. It would seem as though they've lost much of their momentum, wouldn't it?

As chapters go, Luke 9 is a rough one. Jesus and his disciples—they weather it; but it poignantly records this moment when reality hits, the headwinds shift, and things start to “go downhill”, for lack of a better term. That's the thrust of Luke 9. That's the context in which Luke records Peter, James, and John's experience as they witness Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. And the more I study this, the more I am convinced that the context matters profoundly. You see, scholars say that the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke is the linchpin of the whole book. And in particular, they point to vs. 51. We didn't read it this morning, but it's not a difficult verse. Luke 9:51 says: When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. That single verse colors everything Jesus does from here on out in Luke's gospel. There will be no straying, no shirking, no resisting, no juggling, and no avoiding it. Jesus has set his face for Jerusalem.

I think it's an interesting expression Luke uses—he set his face... I can't help but draw the parallel to our lesson this morning: “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed....” The appearance of his face changed—changed to what it really looks like—changed to the radiance, the unearthly, indescribable, majesty and glory of God. And in that moment, we see that Jesus is not merely a man on a mission. The God of the universe is on a mission.

Peter, James, and John have witnessed and participated in amazing things. But they've also heard troubling teaching. They've seen enough to trust Christ's divinity, but they're anxious and uneasy about the path he's laid out. What he does looks godly, but what he says sounds hellish. They're confused. They've got genuine doubts and hard questions. But it is in just that moment that they have this tremendous experience of transfiguration and revelation. Despite all that is uncertain and unknown, they follow Christ in a grueling upward climb, and God meets them in their exhaustion and their worry and their bungling attempts to construct some kind of sanctuary from the mounting troubles. And so it can be for us. God still meets us in the upward climb and the downhill slog. God still meets us in our exhaustion, our worry, our loneliness, our bungling humanity, our failures and doubt. That is where this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime story intersects with our life today.

This is a story about courage – the courage to encounter God, to trust God, to let God be God even when the headwinds have changed and the road in front of us is unclear. We know this story was very important to the earliest followers of Jesus because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all take pains to tell the story. They all report the change in appearance, dazzling white robes, light from an unknown source. They all report the presence of Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. But only Luke tells us anything about what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah might have been discussing: “they were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” I’m not sure why the word ‘departure’ is translated as it is. The word in original Greek is ‘exodus’—they were discussing his exodus. For Peter, James, and John, ‘exodus’ has deep meaning. Jesus is not merely ‘departing’. Jesus is taking his place in the story of deliverance. This is about salvation, covenant, the work of God in human history. This is their identity as the people of God. This is not merely life-changing stuff they’re witnessing—this is earth-shattering stuff; world-changing stuff; history-making stuff. This is a moment when Peter, James, and John catch a vision, however fleeting, of God’s continued work despite the changing headwinds. God is not intimidated by tough decisions and hard questions. God is not impotent in the face of our pain and suffering. When we can’t see the road in front of us, God can! The God of the universe is on a mission.

Let me tell a pair of short stories to wrap this up. One is about a young missionary who arrives at her mission site to begin a two-year stint. She can’t help but notice the dated nature of the homeless shelter she’s been assigned to oversee – the faded wallpaper, the worn furniture, the old appliances, the dirty windowsills, the cracked Formica countertops, the pile of ants devouring a morsel left on the floor. This isn’t what she’s used to. But she’s come to serve, so crawls into her rickety cot that first night, trying to sleep while the traffic buzzes and the nightclub down the street has enough pulse in the base to rattle the windows of the shelter. But by the time two years are up, and she must move on, the tears flow. Every surface in that tired old place now is imprinted in her mind with the memories of the people she’s met, the friends she made, the work they’ve done together, the laughter and tears, the progress and set-backs, the beauty of life lived in Christian community. The transfiguration is in her. She’s changed, don’t you know? She’s encountered God there. Trusted God there. Cried out for God there. Worked for God there. Transfiguration doesn’t change the landscape. It changes how we see it.

The second story comes from a former pastor, Rev. Dr. Bill Ritter, who tells about attending a wedding at Nardin Park U.M.C. in Farmington Hills after his retirement. That’s my home church. It was the wedding of a friend, and he found himself in the unusual position of being a member of the congregation rather than the officiant. Now, if you’ve never been to Nardin Park, the front of the sanctuary is a huge stained-glass window of Jesus and his disciples. I mean, the window IS the wall, and it goes floor to ceiling, easily some 20 feet wide and some 40 feet high. It’s enormous. And it’s gorgeous. When you sit in the sanctuary, taking in that window, it’s breath-taking, even if you don’t have emotional attachment to it. Anyway, he’s sitting there for the wedding and the conversation between the couple behind him starts to intrude on his awareness. Crass. Obnoxious. Here they are in this beautiful sanctuary, looking at this gorgeous window, listening to incredible music swelling on the pipe organ as beloved bridesmaids are starting to make their way down the aisle, and the guy points the window out to his girlfriend and whispers, “Wow. I wonder what a .357 Magnum would do to that?”

Bill goes on to write: “I wanted to turn around, shake his lapels, and say to him: “Look, buddy, if this place, if this window, if the figure in the window, if this moment, if this music, if these lovers, if none of this means anything to you, can you tell me what, if anything, does?” I mean, at some point in your life (God willing), you are going to have an experience for which no other word will suffice except

the word "sacred." And it's going to touch you, move you, humble you. Moreover, it's going to shut your ever-moving mouth, bring a tear to your eye, form a lump in your throat, drag a long, slow sigh from your lungs, and quite possibly even drop you to your knees!" [adapted slightly from "The Best of Rooms" by William A. Ritter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] Which everyone ought to experience at least once in their life, if they're truly going to live.

Jesus of Nazareth went up the mountain with the three defeated men – three men who could barely keep their eyes open enough to pray – three men carrying the weight of darkness and doubt – three men grappling with how to let their own light shine in the valleys of despair. Three men not unlike us. But for a few moments in time, they truly live. For a breath, a heartbeat, they are reminded of their history in the persons of Moses and Elijah, they encounter a holy God – one who transfigures, transforms, rebirths, reenergizes and resurrects – and they behold the glory of a courageous Christ who, if we just listen, calls us to go forth with courage, not because it's always easy, but because we're not alone. They drop to their knees in reverence of a sacred moment. They are touched by the holy. They, too, are transfigured within. And despite Peter's suggestion for a retreat center, they don't stay. They follow Jesus back down into the valley of failure, argument and rejection.

For a few moments in time, you and I have the chance to reflect on their experience and allow ourselves to be reformed and refashioned into reflections of God's love and grace. As we follow Jesus down into the valleys of darkness, doubt, and danger, may we, too, feel ourselves transfigured with hope, and find within, the courage to push onward in service to the life-giving grace of God and to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen.